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ABSTRACT

Action Research on Change in Schools (ARCS) was a two-year collaborative action research project involving two groups of middle/junior high school teachers, one in Michigan and one in New Hampshire. While the purpose of the project for the university researchers was to examine individual change within the framework of collaborative action research, the pervasive concern of the teachers throughout the project was school change. Based on these goals, the ARCS teams evolved into "temporary systems," defined as groups of individuals who engage in a joint task for a limited period of time. Peer support, the sharing of ideas, the experience of collegiality and group decision making, were especially prized by the ARCS teachers. The teams created their own operational contexts based on an atmosphere of collegiality and inquiry. By the end of the project, both teams recommended that the context created through the collaborative action research process become the school's context for decision making and initiating change. (BW)

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SCHOOL CONTEXT, NEW CONTEXTS AND SCHOOL CHANGE

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SCHOOL CONTENT, NEW CONTEXTS, AND SCHOOL CHANGE

Action Research on Change in Schools (ARCS)* was a two year collaborative action research project involving two groups of middle/junior high school teachers, one in Michigan and one in New Hampshire.

The purpose of the ARCS study was to investigate the relationship between developmental stages, action research in schools, and individual teacher change. The study was designed to address three questions:

1. To what extent do teachers' stages of development (ego, moral, and conceptual) influence and affect the changes they undertake? The context of the changes? The content of the changes?

2. How do the contextual variables of the school, i.e., the definition, rewards, expectations, norms, social climate, structure, etc. affect individual teacher change?

3. What is the role and impact of action research in the promotion of individual change? What is the impact of action research on teachers' psychological development? To what extent does action research provide support and challenge for individual teacher change?

Beginning the Project: Prospects for Individual and Individual and School Change

Focusing on individual change brings attention to action research as a staff development process for promoting professional and psychological growth and renewal. But the ARCS project involved more than individual teacher change. Inherent in the title of the project - Action Research for Change in Schools - was the expectation of a schoolwide change effort. Reinforcing the idea of schoolwide change was the teachers' decision to focus their efforts on conducting group research projects rather than executing individual research projects in each of their classrooms. So while the purpose of the project for the university researchers was to examine individual change within the framework of collaborative action research, the pervasive concern of the teachers throughout the project was school change.

* For a detailed description of the project and its findings see Oja, S.N. and Pine, G.J. A Two Year Study of Teachers' Stages of Development in Relation to Collaborative Action Research. Final report submitted to NIE September 1983.

School change became the content of the action research process and subsequently an important arena of inquiry for the project as the teachers began to examine the implications and recommendations of their findings. In the final stage of the project the process of inquiry gave way to the urgency of implementing and acting on findings. The teachers' attention turned to the strategies and possibilities of change embedded in the recommendations of their studies.

The questions of change which the teachers struggled with in the final phase of the project were the elements which originally attracted them to the ARCS. This is to be expected when one considers that action research is research for action - a participatory form of inquiry which leads to effective action - the systematic collection of data to bring about change - applied research which actively involves the researcher in the cause for which the research is conducted (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982:215).

The possibilities of change motivated the Michigan and New Hampshire teachers to participate in the ARCS project. In their initial interviews and responses on the Educational Experiences Inventory change was the pervasive theme illuminating individual motivation and involvement in ARCS. For example, members of the Michigan team referred to specific issues of change in citing reasons for participation in the project:

JIM

I have been involved in the transition of a junior high to a middle school change because of personnel, community, etc. I would like to look more closely at those items that cause change.

* * *

LORI

I'm always interested in hearing about innovations in education which will make me a more effective teacher.

The Oakland University letter, which explained ARCS, left questions in my mind which I wanted clarified. The word, CHANGE, interested me. What aspect of change was ARCS concerned with?

I suspected that it was the change from middle school to junior high school - whoops, vice versa.

With declining enrollment as crucial an issue as it is in the school district, CHANGE is a key word: change in staff, change in teacher assignments, change in services, change in curriculum.

. . . Likewise, I've been teaching for twelve years now,

and I'm determined not to fall into the rut of an experienced teacher whose most important teaching tool is the file cabinet.

* * *

JANE

I think this program can make a difference - too many development programs are filed and forgotten. Also - I want to change. In the past, I have always liked to try new things, but in the last 3 or 4 years, I think I've slacked off on innovation and become a bit complacent.

I want to do something new, I've gotten some systems down pat and working well. I'd like to extend 'down pat and working well' to other areas.

* * *

ANNE

I see the Action Research on Change in Schools Project as an excellent means of incorporating new or 'changing' methods into my classroom. The community and school are in constant change. I seem to be at a stage in life and teaching when change is necessary and needs to be made.

* * *

FLORENCE

I would like to explore some new approaches to presentation of language to students at this level. I think I am a good teacher. But schools change and students change. I know my methods have changed and I hope the change was an improvement. However, I know there are probably ways that I can be more effective, and I'd like to explore those possibilities. It is important to do this. I want to find out if there are some ways to institute changes in my methods, and still be as effective a teacher as I think I am now.

* * *

The Michigan teachers saw ARCS as an opportunity to change their approaches in the classroom, to renew themselves professionally and personally, to be innovative, and to avoid falling into a rut.

For the New Hampshire teachers, coping with effects of change, professional advancement and growth, bringing change to the classroom, studying change, and participating in a "serious" change effort were needs which could be addressed through ARCS.

BROOKS

I enjoyed my involvement with the Teacher Corps at the

junior high three years ago. Since that time the school has gone through one change right after another. I, personally, am trying to discover the effects that these changes have on me. The stress I feel at times has led me to take up running. For the past two years I have talked about finding another job. Why? I just don't seem to be able to cope with all the changes.

* * *

ELLICT

I am interested in preparation to advance to roles of more responsibility; ARCS will ideally motivate thought and greater precision in my conceptualization of issues relevant in an advanced position. My personal life right now is substantially involved in planning and preparing for professional growth/ change.

* * *

TED

I hope all of us are going to work together and form a team. I hope we have a close working relationship which will carry over into the school and the classroom. I hope when we focus on something it will be something that all of us can bring back into our classroom. At least meet some of the needs of the pupils here and not be something that abstract or just something that's going to be filed away.

* * *

JOHN

I enjoy teaching junior high students. I have taught in public and private, small and large schools. Many changes good and bad, many ideas of how to improve. In the past my personal life has been hectic so extra time could not be used. Now I have the time to study change.

* * *

JACK

I hope that I'm not expecting too much. I'm interested in participating in this. I'm more of a practical person. I'm more willing to discuss theory, that doesn't both me, but how does it apply? Somebody can say to me, OK, now, this can be used, it can be applied, it's fine. If it's just a complete theory, it isn't going to have pracitcal applications then I'm not even inter- ested in participating. That's why, in some cases, I have stayed away from things. I have taken courses,

conferences strictly to satisfy my staff development because I needed the staff development and it was fine. I said now, maybe its time to participate in something serious.

As they entered the project, the teachers' interests were expressed around issues of personal and professional growth, change in instructional approaches, and change in their classrooms. An oblique indication of their interest in schoolwide changes was reflected in responses on the Problem Identification Questionnaire administered during the first team meeting in October 1981. Teachers were asked to identify five problems facing teachers and schools today. Among the 49 responses form the original 10 participants, only six dealt with specific classrooms or curriculum issues. The major topics of concern to the teachers included educational financing, school morale, school administration, scheduling, declining enrollments, student achievement, student discipline, and lack of faith in schools by society.

While these responses suggested that teachers were interested in macro-changes, the initial interviews conducted at the beginning of the project revealed that teachers were more optimistic about the benefits of the project for themselves than for their schools. Teachers from both sites saw the primary benefits of the project in terms of opportunities for personal growth - "help me put things together," "better person to make decisions," "a chance to improve." Teachers also mentioned as benefits - "help me to become a better educator," "meet some of the needs of the pupils," "will carry over to the classroom," and "help students achieve better." Teachers were far less optimistic about the benefits of the project for their schools. Comments from teachers in both sites included, "unpredictable for school," "for large part of school no benefits." Only one teacher from New Hampshire and one from Michigan believed the project would have an effect on the rest of the school.

Temporary Systems and the Action Research Process

Formed together out of a desire for personal, professional and/or classroom change, the ARCS teams evolved into temporary systems (Miles, 1964; Goodman & Goodman, 1976; Morley & Silver, 1977; and Benne, Bradford, Gibb, & Lippitt, 1975). A temporary system consists of a group of individuals who engage in a joint task for a limited period of time (Miles, 1964). People come together, interact, create something, and then disband. Examples include conferences, workshops, institutes, retreats, study groups, and projects. "Such systems are brought into being to develop an idea, a plan, a product, a service, or to make something happen. When the task is completed, or the time set has expired the system is dissolved. Permanent systems, in contrast, exist to carry out relatively repetitive operations, or to provide services for which there is a continuing need" (Gant, South, & Hansen, 1977:4).

Both of the ARCS research teams functioned as temporary systems

in the permanent systems of their middle schools. Within temporary systems, individuals and groups may behave differently than in the permanent system because there is no necessary commitment to permanent organizational change. New structures and norms can be substituted for existing ones and can be tried out to determine their value. Power and status differentials may be minimized to facilitate new patterns of communication and to locate areas of needed change. For instance, where teachers can freely intereact as peers, new patterns of problem solving and new approaches to decision making can be tried.

The action research teams (temporary systems) operated very differently from the ways in which the schools (permanent systems) operated. Corbett (1982:12), in describing innovation efforts in 14 schools, could have been speaking about the ARCS teams:

> Instead of relying on students for most of their human contact in the harried atmosphere of the classroom, teachers were able to sit in relatively uninterrupted settings to discuss professional matters; instead of making decisions about a single classroom individually, they became involved in joint planning for the entire school; and instead of having few, if any, adult sources of feedback and encouragement about their teaching performances, they worked in a supportive environment in which commendations for action were frequent from peers, outside experts, . . .

Peer support, the sharing of ideas, the experience of collegiality and group decision making, were especially prized by the ARCS teachers. As temporary systems the action research teams involved individual development, providing teachers with opportunities to experience and practice different roles and functions; and group development, providing teachers with the opportunity to experiment with interdependent behavior and to use different methods of problems solving and decision making to achieve the objectives of their inquiry.

Creative New Contexts

The action research teams created their own operational contexts which contrasted markedly with the operational contexts of their schools (see Table 1). They organized, operated, and developed new norms and structures in such a fashion as to highlight different assumptions as to what makes for effectiveness in running schools - their schools in particular. That is, by varying the principles used to organize and to operate themselves, the teams made more visible corresponding and contrasting principles in use in their schools. Consequently, within the contours of the ARCS project the process of action research emerged as more significant than the product.

Table 1

TEACHER PERCEIVED SCHOOL AND ACTION RESEARCH CONTEXTS

School Context (Permanent System)	Action Research Team Context (Temporary System)
1. Change initiated and managed from the top	1. Change initiated and managed from the bottom, middle and top
2. Hierarchial principal managed	2. Non-hierarchial self-managed
3. Information generated for management - management information system	3. Information generated for everyone - problem solving information system
4. Norm of mutual tolerance	4. Norm of collegiality
5. Norm of convention	5. Norm of experimentation
6. Power concentrated at the principal's office	6. Power diffused in the team
7. Teachers handle limited specific roles and functions	7. Teachers handle different roles and functions, roles exchanged
8. Assignment of tasks to teachers	8. Teachers develop their own tasks
9. Teachers' roles defined and structured	9. Teachers' roles overlapping and flexible
10. Individual "private cycle" of problem solving in the classroom	10. Group "public cycle" collaborative problem solving outside the classroom
11. "Behaviorially" busy setting - reactive thinking cognitive economy	11. A setting of pause - reflective thinking - cognitive expansion
12. Directed and reactive inquiry	12. Participatory and collaborative inquiry
13. Immediate, concrete, "in-classroom" perspecitve of classrooms and school	13. Detached "out of classroom" perspective of classrooms and school
14. Short term and quick "on demand" problem solving	14. Sustained deliberate inquiry
15. Recipe knowledge	15. General programmatic knowledge

For members of the Michigan team the highlight of the project was the opportunity to work together in an atmosphere of collegiality and inquiry:

LORI

I think being introduced to action research as a process has been the most valuable part of the project for me. In fact, as I look back at the work that we've done and the topics we've discussed in our - in everything that we've done, the fact that we've been able to work within the model made all the differ- ence. I see how valuable the model is and see, too, how the model can be used in so many different situations with - . Quite honestly, any number of people, you know, it can be expanded, it can be reduced or whatever.

* * *

JIM

I think the thing that sticks out most in my mind - there were a lot of fun things, a lot of exciting things, meeting teams and making presentations - but I think even greater than that was just working with four or five people that really had skills but never just really refined them and seeing the awareness of that group working together in terms of their own capabilities, what they have as individuals they can perform. I think it was exciting to see people that can work on a day-to-day basis really use some skills that they have and have built since that point and just working to- gether . . . I've always believed in a teaching staff there's a number of skills that we just don't tap that people have. And it was good to see them come out and I think a lot of people felt good about it and felt good about themselves.

* * *

ANNE

It really helps you, in your daily work life to know about other people and to know what they're doing in their job and what you're doing, and so forth. And that's kind of important to me, I like the collegiality and that's, of course, one of our proposals, and I hope that we will be able to spend more time either working together toward something, maybe just having some time where we can, you know, have some collegiality with each other . . .

I said this before, you know, it's a shot in the arm, but I wish more people could go through a process of feeling this

is something that I am doing that is really good and everybody is going to get something out of this eventually.

* * *

FLORENCE

Well, the one thing that stands out for me is probably mainly the fact that we all kept our interest level in it, you know, it didn't wear like other projects usually do. We didn't mind going to the meetings. I think that's the major thing that really surprised me, the interest . . .

When I'm criticized I . . . my first reaction to that ordinarily is if I'm criticized, I feel defensive but with these other people in his group I don't feel defensive because we work so much together on other things and criticize each other and we know there's never anything personal.

* * *

For the New Hampshire teachers the opportunity to conduct research, a to participate in a collaborative process, to travel, and to be viewed as knowledgeable professionals were highlights of the ARCS project.

JOHN

What really stands out for me is: Working with the people mostly and getting to know the people that have been on the team, working with them is the most important factor . . . I'm a person who never writes. I would call someone on the telephone rather than write them a letter - wherever they were and if they couldn't get to a telephone tough luck, they just didn't hear from me - that's how bad I am about writing. And I've done what I think is a lot of writing about differ- ent things in this project that stick out in my mind. Going places and seeing other people and other people's way of doing things and discovering you're really not that far off the track from everybody else - that's been kind of a reward . . . Meeting other people. Being a (I hate to use the term because its not really true) but being thought of as an expert in something so that when you're meeting them they have the feeling that you know something and you even have the feeling that maybe you know something. That's a good feeling, good experience.

* * *

TED

What stands out in my mind is the idea that the word

research no longer is scary . . . I think before if somebody said you were going to do a research paper, I always used to run the other way. That's one thing that stands out. Another thing that stands out, I think, is the report that we did. I was kind of amazed at how technical it did turn out and I would think we added a little bit to the knowledge of burnout. The struggles that we had losing our way many, many times, the frustration sometimes, not agreeing with the final topic stands out a little bit . . . the idea of wanting to produce something that would be very, very concrete and useable and hoping to get the staff a little more excited about the junior high.

* * *

BROOKS

Looking back over the two years of the project what really stands out for me is working as a group, really working closely with a group that meets consistently on a basis that has a common understanding, common goal. And I guess the fact that we came together as not knowing where we're going to be but eventually hammered out a direction and I thought that fact that there was no prescribed or set agenda - that we set our own agenda I thought was really important for the group to have continued and have that commitment. Rather than, you know, sometimes I make the excuse, well, I don't really want to go to this meeting so I'll think of an excuse for why I really don't want to go, why I really don't have that commitment to go and I think that the commitment of the group was really above and beyond any group that I have worked with - school-related. I thought that was, in my mind, stands out as really important . . . Basically, I think the way our group worked was that's what the key was, that it was a collaborative research group and I think the workings of that was really what was the focal point. I wouldn't change anything, I mean, I thought it was a, the organization of the research project was well thought out, served the purpose for which we were brought together for and really evolved a group from that and just strengthened it. It was fine. I also think that it has to do with personalities, too. Basically your assumption is that each group is different and that it will find its own identity. So to impose any kind of structure on it would be to negate the outcome of the group.

* * *

ELIOT

Let's say, I don't get to do too many 'wild' things any more so I enjoyed the road trips and found some intellectually interesting things happening on the trips to Syracuse and to Montreal.

I guess they weren't even so intellectually exciting as personally exciting. Just being able to hear speakers make presentations who I may have quoted in a paper I wrote somewhere along the line, things like that.

It was not the prospect, probabilities, or specifics of school change that stood out at the end of the project for the ARCS teachers - it was the process of collaboration which led to personal and professional growth. In Brooks' words, "Some very ordinary teachers became very extraordinary in a short period of time." In the teachers' view, it is the process of collaborative action research that lasts - that has enduring value. This perspective of making change through the action research process is expressed clearly in the principal recommendations of both ARCS teams.

The Michigan team's study urges that:

1. The process of collaborative action research be applied in all future staff development and school change efforts. The collaborative process should allow teaching staff to have significant influence in select- ing the agenda for school and curriculum change and give teachers ownership of change studies. Collabor- ative action research will provide the opportunity for school improvement and educational change through a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach.

2. Scheduling is so complex and affects the quality of life for teachers and students in such profound ways that the scheduling process must reflect the full participation of teachers. The process should be initiated by the last quarter of the school year. A scheduling committee consisting of teachers and using the action research process should be established to develop and implement the 1984-85 schedule. When the committee plans the schedule it should take into account the recommendations of this report.

The New Hampshire team's study recommends that:

1. The effectiveness of the colaborative action research model within an actual project for change should be studied. Such a plan would probably involve the leader of the change project (e.g., principal, supervisor) as a member of the action research team.

2. A future action research team could create and implement a program for reducing stress in the school and then evaluate this program by using the HSS in a pre-test/ post-test analysis. For instance, involvement in

decision making seems to relate to levels of morale/ job satisfaction. Conclusions drawn from this study and others reviewed suggest this important organiza- tional change should be studied by administrators and teachers.

3. Teachers who are now experienced in the collaborative research process could use their skills in promoting the process with other school staffs at other sites.

In summary, both teams recommend that the context created through the collaborative action research process become the school's context for decision making and initiating change. For the ARCS teachers the process of action research is its most important product and has the greatest potentiality for effecting change in schools.